

A quick introduction to Esperanto

In 1887 a Warsaw physician, L.L. Zamenhof, published a small booklet in Russian titled “Dr. Esperanto’s International Language”. This booklet was the beginning of a language that soon took its creator’s pseudonym, “Esperanto”, for its own name. As translations of the booklet appeared in other languages, people around the world began to learn Esperanto, to write in Esperanto, and to speak it with other people who had also learned it. Soon there was a flourishing community of speakers around the world, and an emerging body of literature, both original and in translation (including Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and other classic works). International groups and organizations for and about the new language began to appear. By 1905, there were enough Esperanto speakers for the first “International Congress” to be held in the French city of Boulogne-sur-Mer, with nearly 700 people from 20 different countries. And people continue to learn and speak the language today.

But what exactly is Esperanto, why did Zamenhof create it, and why has it captured and held the interest of so many people around the world?

What is Esperanto?

Esperanto is a practical, functioning, ideologically neutral language for people-to-people contacts everywhere on this planet. It has a grammar that is simple, logical, and regular. People can acquire a working knowledge of Esperanto in a fraction of the time it takes to learn any other modern language. Its vocabulary is similar to that of many Western languages, so that people who know those languages find many points of familiarity.

Esperanto is a living, vibrant language. It is a constructed language, in that its basic grammar and vocabulary were created specifically to serve as an easy-to-learn second language. Yet in its 130 years of existence, many speakers and writers have breathed into it a style and character that are uniquely its own.

Esperanto is spoken all over the world, although nobody knows exactly how many people speak it. Estimates range from a few hundred thousand, to possibly as high as two million.

The logic and regularity which are Esperanto’s most outstanding features can be illustrated by many examples, but we will give just one. Esperanto has what language specialists call an agglutinative structure, which means that you can change the meaning or function of words by adding elements such as prefixes, suffixes, or verb endings to their basic forms. English and other Western languages contain this feature, too, but in a more limited and irregular way.

Compare the way English and Esperanto words are modified to form their opposite meanings. Both languages use the device of a prefix to signal an exactly contrary meaning to the remainder of the word. But English uses not one prefix, but many, as in the words *inconvenient*, *ignoble*, *immature*, *counterclockwise*, *uncover*, *disappear*, *maladroit*, and so on. With other words, the prefixing is no longer apparent, as in “enemy,” originally formed by joining *en-* to a word that meant “friend.”

Not only does English have many different prefixes that do one job, as shown in this example; the prefixes are not interchangeable. You can’t say *malconvenient*, or *imclockwise*. With English, you have to learn which form is correct for each word. And to make things more interesting, there are words like “uncanny,” which is not at all the opposite of “canny,” and “inflammable,” which means precisely the same thing as “flammable.” Many other common words cannot be formed into opposites by adding any prefix, but require a completely separate word (such as “old” vs. “young,” “tall” vs. “short,” etc.)

The Esperanto system is completely regular: one prefix and only one, “mal-”, forms the opposite meaning of words that have an opposite. So from “bona” (“good”)

you derive “malbona” (“bad”), and from “bela” (“beautiful”) you derive “malbela” (“ugly”).

This and other features make Esperanto not just a highly expressive language, but also by far the easiest to learn. In the U.S., millions of adults set out each year to teach themselves a foreign language. A few actually succeed, but for the vast majority the task is too great. By contrast, a substantial proportion of Esperanto speakers worldwide have learned the language on their own, often from a book such as this one.

One major obstacle to learning a foreign language is the discouragement that results from slow progress. Esperanto students progress rapidly and are encouraged by it. Unlike students of national languages who spend months or years plowing through a succession of textbooks and readers before graduating to “real” books and magazines, Esperanto students are soon able to move up to reading the literature and periodicals of their choice. In addition, learning Esperanto promotes general language skills, and serves as a stepping-stone to learning other languages.

There are many practical advantages of knowing Esperanto: opportunities for correspondence and travel, access to literature not available in English, the chance to make friends anywhere in the world. Not the least of Esperanto’s benefits is the feeling of solidarity it creates among all its speakers. Esperanto speakers sense a oneness that transcends nations and politics and sees humankind as one great family after all. In today’s uneasy world, can that be a bad thing?

The History of Esperanto: A Brief Overview

As a boy growing up in the city Białystok, today a part of Poland but at that time in the Russian Empire, Zamenhof had been struck by the antipathy with which the borderland town’s language and ethnic communities regarded each other. There were Poles, Jews, Germans, and Russians. Each group had its own language, religion, and customs, and each group treated the others with fear and distrust, if not overt hatred. To Zamenhof it seemed language was at least the mortar that kept the walls of misunderstanding in place. Being sensitive and

idealistic, he promised himself to see those walls toppled some day.

Zamenhof was born with an unusual gift for languages. His father was a teacher of German and Hebrew, so he grew up in a language-rich environment. At school he excelled in German, French, Latin, and Greek. He was most comfortable with Russian, the language of the schools. He knew Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew, and some English. In fact, the simplicity of English grammar was part of what inspired him to develop a simplified grammar for Esperanto.

By 1879, Zamenhof had already drafted his version of an international language and taught it to friends during his last year of school. Even as he embarked on his medical career after studying in Moscow and Warsaw, he continued to labor over his project of a truly workable international language that would be easy to learn.

In 1887 Zamenhof married Clara Zilbernik. Later that year with Clara’s support (and financial assistance from his father-in-law), he published in Russian his *International Language, Introduction and Complete Textbook*. It was an unpretentious gray booklet of only 40 pages, but one that would ultimately have a large impact. Separate editions were later printed in Polish, French, and German.

The book was signed with a pseudonym. The pseudonym he chose was “Esperanto,” which means “One who hopes.” Enthusiasts began referring to “Dr. Esperanto’s language,” and the new language itself quickly came to be known by that name. Besides the “complete textbook,” there was a basic list of about 900 words, and some sample texts, including translations from the Bible, a personal letter, and three short poems. The poems are especially interesting, as they demonstrate Zamenhof’s conviction that along with grammar and vocabulary, a particular style or character, a literary “soul,” if you will, is also an essential part of any language.

The Zamenhofs spent their evenings mailing the little book to book dealers, prominent people, and newspapers. One of the first responses, written in Latin, was from Richard Geoghegan, a young student of Chinese at Oxford, who’d read about Dr. Esperanto’s

language in a local paper. Geoghegan subsequently learned the new language, translated Zamenhof's little book into English, and introduced the language into England and Ireland. He also brought Esperanto to the western United States, where he emigrated in 1891. Another early convert was Henry Phillips, secretary of the American Philosophical Society, who prepared an American version of Zamenhof's book, which was published by the Henry Holt Co. of New York.

In Europe, Esperanto clubs began springing up, the first issue of a magazine called *La Esperantisto* appeared in Germany, and famous people, among them Leo Tolstoy and the linguist Max Müller, endorsed the language. Zamenhof began publishing yearly directories with names and addresses of known Esperanto speakers, so they could make contact with one another.

The language was now firmly launched, but "Dr. Esperanto's" wish to drop into the background was futile. His identity quickly became known and he was inundated with letters: requests for information, queries about matters of style or grammar, suggestions for changes. As to the latter, he had already tried and rejected most of the proposed "improvements" during a decade of experimenting before he published the language. In the end only one very minor change was adopted.

It's interesting to compare surviving texts of early versions of the language, as they shed much light on the way Zamenhof settled on the grammar and word forms that make up his invention. Every new idea was tested in actual use. He always chose the practical over the theoretical: classical conjugations and declensions gave way to what was simple but functional. Above all, he was determined that the individual elements of his language, though drawn from many different sources, should combine to form a single, cohesive language system with a pleasing sound and character all its own. It was Dr. Zamenhof's real genius that enabled him to succeed in doing just that.

Zamenhof also insisted that Esperanto must develop naturally, through popular use, not by anyone's decree. One rule provides that "foreign" words, those which most languages have taken from a common source, come into Esperanto unchanged except for spelling. Thus Esperanto today is well equipped with technical

terms of many kinds. Aside from that, anyone is free to propose new words or grammatical forms; but only if these find acceptance by Esperanto speakers at large do they become part of the language.

The first major international gathering of Esperanto speakers occurred in 1905 at Boulogne-sur-Mer, a seaside resort in northern France. About 700 Esperanto speakers from twenty different lands attended this emotional meeting. The participants, representing the Esperanto community, adopted what is called "The Boulogne Declaration", which defined Esperanto as a politically neutral language for all humankind, which all are free to use, and to which no person or group may ever lay proprietary claim. The basic structure of the language was declared forever untouchable, in principle, with changes and additions to the vocabulary to take place only by a process of natural evolution. An academy of scholarly experts was elected to watch over the language, but their function was, and remains, to advise and interpret, not to make changes or issue directives.

Today, more than 130 years later, Esperanto is still learned and spoken in practically every country in the world. While during its first century of existence it was primarily used in written form (books, letters, and other documents) and only occasionally spoken in meetings and various gatherings, the emergence of the Internet in the 20th century opened up new possibilities for active, real-time use of spoken and written Esperanto. There are formal Esperanto organizations in many countries, such as Esperanto-USA in the United States, and the international Universala Esperanto-Asocio (World Esperanto Association) headquartered in the Netherlands. In addition to formal organizations (which often provide services like book sales, newsletters, and regional or national meetings), hundreds of informal groups now exist and function around the world.

Integral to Esperanto, although no one is required to agree with it, is what is called "la interna ideo" ("the internal idea"). Formulated by Dr. Zamenhof himself, it says "On the basis of a neutral language, we want to eliminate the barriers between people and accustom them to seeing in those around them simply other human beings, their brothers and sisters." This idea inspires and motivates many Esperanto speakers today.